WHIRRAKEE

January/ February 2000 Vol. 21 No. 1

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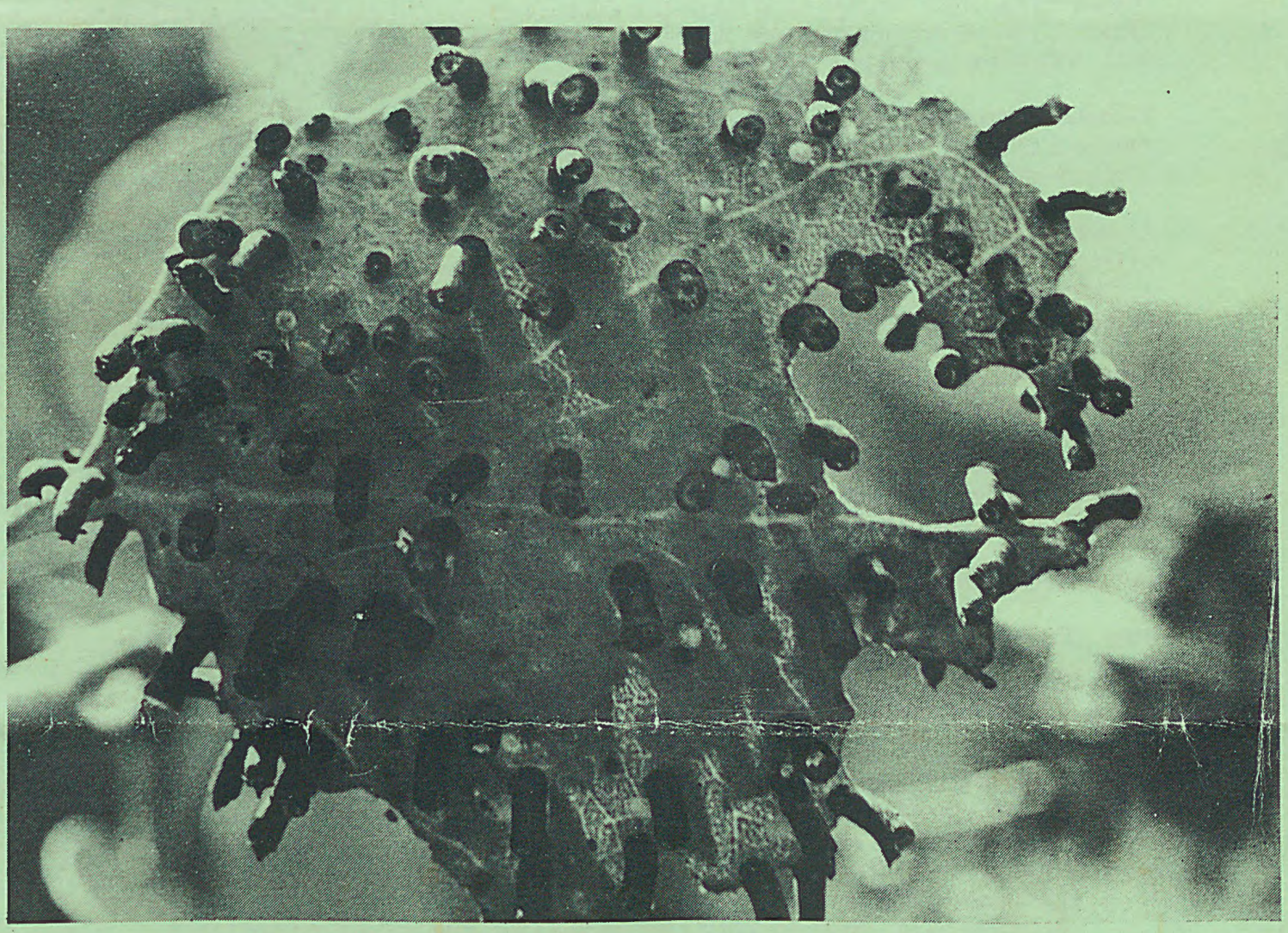

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE BENDIGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Address for correspondence: PO Box 396, Bendigo 3552

Office Bearers for 1999 - 2000

President	Rod Orr	2 Cockerel Court, Bendigo	5443 5668
Senior Vice President	Barbara Chmielewska	Melaleuca Ave, Longlea	5439 3075
Junior Vice President	Matthew Comer		
Secretary	Anne Bridley	39 Cootamundra Place, Junortoun	5449 3479
Minute Secretary	not filled yet		
Treasurer	Glenise Moors	Mandurang South Rd. Sedgwick	5439 6254
Membership Officer	Kate Lottkowitz	80 Piccaninny Rd, RSD Strathfieldsaye	5439 3157
Excursion organiser	done by the committee		
Syllabus organiser	Bill Holsworth	13 Nabilla Crs, Bendigo	5443 4063
Librarian	Diana Collier	31 Milroy Street, Bendigo	5443 0137
Whirrakee contacts	Tom Burton	Tannery Lane, Mandurang	5439 3028
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		e-mail: s.wilkens@bendigo.latrobe.edu.au	

Membership of the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club is open to all those interested in Natural History. The subscription rates are: Single $30; Family $35; Concession: Single $25; Family $30. *Whirrakee* subscription only is $30.

General meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month. The venue for General meetings is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High Street, Golden Square. Meetings start at 7:30pm and conclude with supper. The Annual Meeting is held in September.

Committee meetings are held on the third Wednesday of each month at 7:30pm. Members of the Committee are the Office Bearers listed above, together with the following members: J. Cleary, D Collier; W N Holsworth; M Lewis; K Lottkowitz; R Moors; S Pelczinski; M Stone.

Excursions The assembly point for excursions is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, unless otherwise specified. Full-day excursions normally commence at 10am (usually on a Sunday); half-day excursions normally commence at 2pm and may be either on a Saturday or Sunday. Full-day or half-day excursions are usually held on the weekend following the General Meeting. Campouts are held several times each year, usually coinciding with long weekends or holiday periods.

The Bendigo Field Naturalists Club has 2 active sub-groups:

Bird Observers Group: meets on the first Friday of the month, at 7:30pm. The venue for meetings is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building.

President: Anne Bridley
Secretary: Jane Cleary

Mammal Study Group: meets on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7:30pm in the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building.

Chairman: John Guley, 39 Cootamundra Place, Junortoun (5449 3479)
Secretary: Bill Holsworth, 13 Nabilla Crs., Bendigo (5443 4063)
Equipment Officer: Maurie Lewis (0407 427179)
Vice Chairman: John Burtonclay, Fadersons Lane, Mandurang (5439 5710)

Front Cover: Photographer: Ian Flecknoe-Brown

The picture shows a Red Gum leaf covered in male galls of the genus *Apiomorpha* sp. These types of galls are also known as coccid galls, after the sap-sucking insects that reside in them. The female galls, usually found close by, look remarkably different. Female apiomorph galls are commonly four-pronged and 5-10cm in length (*A. munita)* or smooth and oval (*A. conica)*. The wingless female whose legs are greatly reduced remains within the gall throughout her life whereas the tiny adult male is winged.

In some years galls are very common (for example last spring many Golden Wattles were suffering from flower galls). The natural control agents of gall-forming insects are often parasitic wasps.

WHIRRAKEE

Monthly Newsletter of the Bendigo Field Naturalist Club

Vol. 21, No. 1, January/February 2000

Whirrakee takes its name from the Whirrakee Wattle (*Acacia williamsonii*) which is virtually endemic to the Bendigo region

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Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the information they use and also for any opinions expressed in their articles.
Contributions will be included as soon as possible after they are received, although articles received more than one week after the monthly General Meeting will probably be too late for inclusion in the next issue of *Whirrakee*.
Articles in *Whirrakee* may be reproduced, but permission should be obtained from the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club, and acknowledgment should be given to the author and the Club. Some back issues are still available on request.

Editors' Note
What great news! Ern Perkins, well known to many of our members, was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for outstanding services to the environment and the community. See page 4 for details.
This is a skinny edition, partly because I have been away . The Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Natural History Notes (pages 6 and 7) were produced as a hand-out sheet for 'Possums after Dark' (part of the Summer in the Park activities) at Rosalind Park on January 28. I hope this will be as successful as last time.
If you look at the Speaker Syllabus for this year you will be amazed at the line-up of high quality, high calibre speakers and the interesting topics. I think for some sessions we might need to get extra chairs in. Thank you to Bill Holsworth for organising this so promptly. The green BFNC leaflets (which include the speaker syllabus) are currently being printed and will be available at the next meeting if you want to distribute some.

Rosellas Nesting and Galahs Cavorting ....and more
Author: Tom Patullo

Cavorting: my dictionary tells me that to cavort is to prance, frisk, frolic, gambol, bound and play. Well, that is about what my friend told me the galahs were doing on the ground, in fact he told me that he thought they were drunk when he saw them. I told him that this is what I must see.
I have seen galahs do some funny tricks but always in a dead gum tree after a shower of rain when they gather in large flocks and festoon themselves along the dead branches where between crooning and screeching they perform all sorts of tricks and acrobatics. Later they gather into a arge flock on the wing and wheeling first to the right and then to the left alternately show first their pink underparts then their grey overparts, and as they wheel and reverse at full flight close to the ground, it makes a sight worth watching.
In the air I have seen them cavorting, but never on the ground. So my friend has promised to take me to see them when they are performing again, which he says actually too frequently.
Also, in the vicinity, I hope to see his battery of rosella nesting boxes, nine in number, which he tells me are filled with breeding rosellas every season.
During a talk on the subject, he passed on a few items worth remembering, such as, never put two nesting boxes in the same tree. He believes that the same breeding pair use the same box each year. Incidentally Ron does not believe in feeding wild birds, he thinks that it is best that the parent bird collect natural food when feeding young. I presume that does not include the planting natural food trees close by.
Ron has never seen any galahs showing an interest in the nesting boxes. He believes that they prefer natural hollows high in the tall timber while rosellas will quite frequently adopt a hollow in a fence post..
Incidentally, he says that he had only one stranger adopting his boxes, a possum.
Ron's area is around the trotting track, I was surprised when he told me that he had never had any sugar gliders pay him a visit, as his area is not so far from the Spring Gully Reservoir boxes operated by our Mammal Club, who find many gliders in their boxes.
I am sure that Ron would welcome a group for a half day visit to his boxes, especially in the Spring when the nesting boxes would be loaded and hopefully the galahs would be cavorting.
I will ask Ron if he would be agreeable.

The story continues...

A further talk with my friend Ron has revealed some facts about the Indian Mynah, a bird which has recently invaded our area. Until now, I thought that the worst that the invader did was to drive the native birds away. Ron tells me that their aggressive tactics are much more that this.
They have not only driven the parent birds away by savage, physical attack and gone on to destroy the rosella's nest, but have thrown the eggs out of the nesting boxes, and taken possession.
Ron said that the attacks are really savage. He says they attack any native bird except the Magpie; he has actually seen the Magpie attack and drive the Indian Mynah away from their nesting tree.

Another news item from Ron is the building of nesting boxes by the Kennington School students in their woodworking classes and their instalment in the trees in the school ground. Their effort is being aided by the Bendigo Fire Brigade who donated the use of their elevated platform.
The result has been the successful adoption by a number of rosellas providing close hand nature studies for the students, and a practical restoration of an environment which has been devoid of natural nesting hollows and a demonstration of how quickly nesting boxes are adopted by our native birds.

Ron tells me that the galahs appear to be returning in large numbers and perhaps we will be treated by their unusual antics which I hope to be able to photograph.

Rod Orr is the Club's representative on the **Whipstick Park Advisory Committee**. Please contact Rod if you have any concerns, questions or suggestions for this committee. Other club members are Anthony Sheean (representing the Bendigo Council) and Ian Fenselau (representing the Beekeepers).

Australia Day Award

Summarised from the Bendigo Advertiser 26/1/2000

Ernest Perkins, a foundation member and several times president, treasurer and newsletter editor of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club since 1976, has been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to conservation and the environment and the Castlemaine community

Mr Perkins has provided more than 20 years service to the conservation movement through his involvement in a range of organisations.

Other than the CFNC, Mr Perkins was a member and office bearer of the Western Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association and chairman of the Kaweka Wildflower Reserve in Castlemaine.

He was a member and district delegate of the Australian Plants Society, a member, office bearer and current secretary of the Bendigo Native Plant Group, a member of the Mount Alexander Shire Roadside Conservation Committee, the Shire Walking Trails Advisory Board, the Shire Heritage Advisory Committee and the shire's Street Tree Advisory Committee.

He has also written more than 20 leaflets and brochures on the natural history of the Castlemaine region

The list goes on.

This is a great achievement, what a pleasure to be recognised by this award.

Congratulations

Mammal Study Group Excursion

29 March 2000 – Wednesday evening:

The Mammal Study Group will be capturing bats at Lake Weeroona again this year as part of a long term study of bats in the Bendigo Region. The evening will start about 6:30pm with a BBQ tea (BYO everything) at the picnic pavilion nearest the RR track. Mist nets will be placed around the pavilion. A short talk on the biology of the bats and the results of the project will be given while we wait for the bats, which will start to come out at 7:50pm. The bats will be weighed and measured before being released. Everyone is welcome, including children.

Please contact Bill Holsworth (Hon. Secretary of the Mammal Study Group) if you have any further questions
Phone 5443 4063,
Email wholsworth@bigpond.com.au

From the Mailbag
Author: Elaine Mathison

Each month the club receives a number of newsletters and magazines: some by subscription and some in exchange for Whirrakee. These are available from the club library.

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HABITAT(ACF)
October 1999

"Water Funds Run Dry for Queensland" by Tim Fisher outlines the reasons for the withholding of Commonwealth funding tied to water reforms.

"Future in Power" by Sam van Rood explains that strategies must be put in place now for Australia to move to non-polluting renewable energy sources.

"Protected Areas of the 21st Century" by Penny Figgis points out the possibility of changes in the way we protect special areas. Key trends are outlined in a new report:

* * * * * * *

NATURE Australia(Aust. Museum)
Summer 1999-2000

"Chilly Origins for Tropical Beaches" by Keith Sircombe discusses the possibility that sand on Australia's east-coast beaches may have begun in Antarctica.

"Chasing Shadows" by David Taggart points out that the Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby is now so rare and elusive it has been nicknamed "The Shadow". One of the techniques designed to increase its numbers is cross-fostering with other more plentiful species.

"Fussy Black-Cockatoos" by Tamra Chapman reports that the fastidious feeding habits of the Glossy Black-Cockatoo and a lack of nest sites may be contributing to its decline on Kangaroo Island.

* * * * * * *

PARK WATCH(VNPA)
December 1999

"Goolengook: a flawless case for conservation" by Andrew Piccone outlines the values of this area where the Goolengook River winds its way through a densely forested valley with significant biological features.

"Millennium Reflections on National Parks" by Amanda Martin explores where our national parks and protected areas have come from and considers the issues and challenges they will face in the future.

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THE BIRD OBSERVER(BOCA)
1) November 1999

- Tree Martins: breeding and habitat; roosting
- The riddle of the glucking bird: from Ludwig Leichhardt's journal
- Pesky Sparrows: survival techniques

2) December 1999

- Birding at Heathcote, Victoria: box-ironbark woodland
- Long-billed Corellas: ground nesting
- Birds of Katherine, Northern Territory

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Also received recently:

*Castlemaine Naturalist(CFNC)
November & December 1999
*Geelong Naturalist(GFNC)
November & December 1999
*Newsletter (Ballarat FNC)
November & December 1999
*Sun-Nat (Sunraysia FNC)
November-December 1999
*Field Nats News(VFNC)
October & December 1999
*Environment Victoria News
November & December 1999
*The Victorian Naturalist(FNCV)
October 1999
*Land for Wildlife News
Sept/Oct 1999

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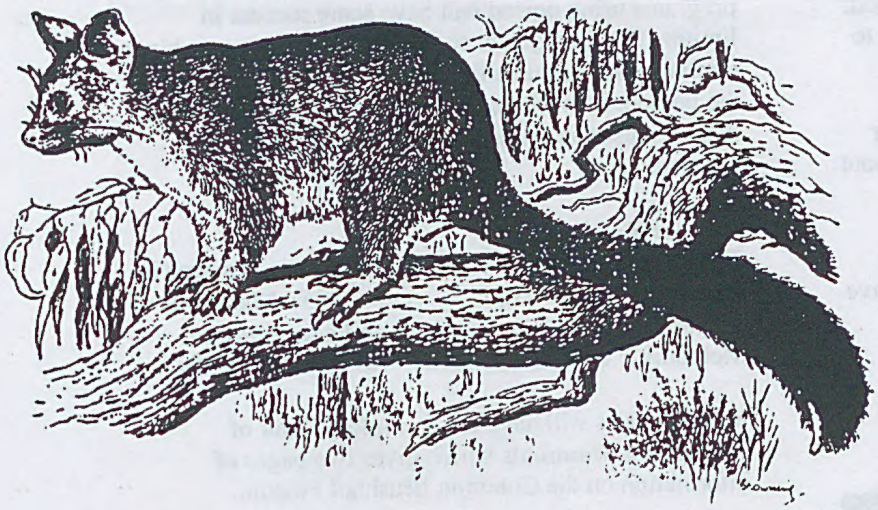
BENDIGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB
NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

COMMON BRUSHTAIL POSSUM

By W. N. Holsworth

Although kangaroos and koalas are the marsupials most commonly identified with Australia, the Common Brushtail Possum is the mammal most Australians are likely to have encountered around their house or in city parks. In Victoria it is found almost everywhere trees grow, except the tall wet forests and rain forests. Its natural home is the drier eucalypt forests and woodlands but it is especially common in city parks and suburbia.



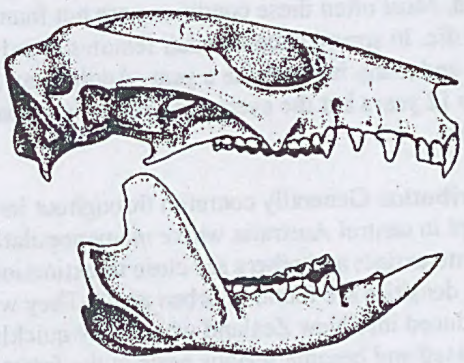
Common Brushtail Possum illustration from Brazenor, C. W. 1950. The Mammals of Victoria.

There are two types of possums common in the towns and cities. The Common Brushtail Possum is about the size of a cat and has pointed ears. In Victoria it has grey fur except for its long bushy tail that is usually black. The Common Ringtail Possum is about half as big as a cat and has rounded ears. It is also mostly grey but its white-tipped tail is covered with fairly short hair.

Most Common Brushtail Possum have a grey back and sides with a grey or yellowish belly. The chest may be stained reddish brown by the secretions from its sternal scent gland. Dark colour phases occur in the high rainfall areas of Wilson's Promontory, Tasmania and New Zealand. The length of the head and body is about 460mmm and the tail about 330mm. Adult males weigh about 2700g, and females about 2350g.

Scientific Name of the Common Brushtail
Trichosurus vulpecula (Pronounced Trik'OSu'Rus [hairy tail] VulPec'Ula [little fox])

Behaviour
Both male and female are solitary, rarely sharing their daytime den with other adults, but the male's territory may overlap with several females. Their home range and territory is centred on their den tree and tends to be exclusive except in places like city parks where large number congregate. In the forest a possum may have several den trees and change dens frequently. Several possums may use each den on different nights. They are strictly nocturnal with all feeding, travelling, courtship, and other interactions taking place at night. They identify and mark the boundaries of their territory with scent from their chin, sternal and anal glands. These secretions stain fur reddish brown. Territorial interactions between a male and female tend to be very mild, but between two males aggressive fighting and chases occur. Vocal communication consists of hisses and deep guttural coughs, grunts and a call that sounds like "Whick-awick-awick-awick".



Possum Skull from Green, R. H. 1983. Skulls of the Mammals in Tasmania.

Population density depends on habitat productivity and suitability for possums. In Australian forests, densities of 0.23 to 4 possums per hectare have been recorded. In New Zealand forests up to 11 per hectare are reported. Even higher densities may occur in urban parks where extra food is available.

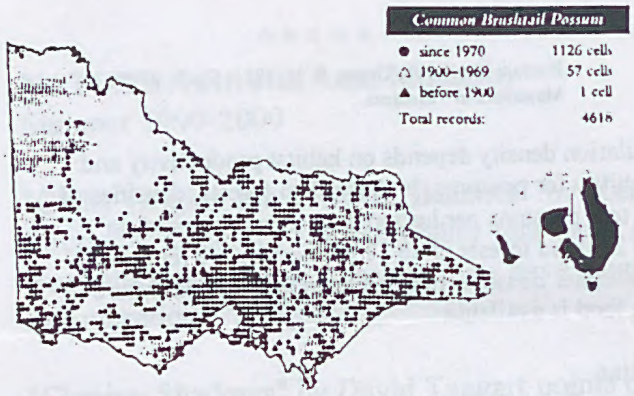
Habitat
Common Brushtail Possums are at home in the open eucalypt forests and woodlands, especially where large old trees provide hollow spouts and trunks as suitable daytime dens. Sometimes they den underground in tree stumps and rabbit warrens. In Victoria they are not found in the wetter alpine forest where the closely related Mountain Brushtail Possum lives. In central Australia they are often found far from trees or water and use termite mounds and rock holes as den sites. In Tasmania and New Zealand, where there are no foxes, possums often move out of the forests at night to feed on pastures.

They are adaptable animals and in urban areas use the attic space in houses and sheds, or nest boxes specially designed for possums (see Department of Natural Resources and Environment pamphlet "Living with Possums").

Diet
Eucalyptus leaves form an important part of their diet but they also require fruit, flowers and flower buds. Vegetables, nuts, grasses, herbs and even meat are eaten. In captivity they can be maintained on a mixed diet of leaves, fruit, vegetables, and dog cubes.

Life Cycle
Females may become sexually mature when one year old. It takes only 16-18 days from mating to the birth of the baby possum. Most young are born between March and May, but there may be a second breeding season in September and October. Twins are very rare even though the forward opening pouch has two teats. The newborn young (joey) remains permanently attached to the teat for 80 days. Pouch life lasts 5 to 6 months and the young are carried on the back until they are weaned when about 8 months old. After leaving the pouch the young animals usually move up to several kilometres from their parents home range. If there is adequate food, suitable den sites, and few other possums, they begin to breed. Most often these conditions are not found and they die. In secure habitats adult females breed every year and many breed twice a year. Adults may live for 10 to 12 years but the average life span is probably about 5 years.

Distribution Generally common throughout its range except in central Australia where many populations have become extinct and others are close to extinction. High densities are found in urban areas. They were introduced into New Zealand where they quickly increased and became serious pests in the forest.



Distribution in Victoria from Menkhorst, P. W. 1995. Mammals of Victoria.
Distribution in Australia from Strahan, R. 1987 Cayley's What Mammal is That.

Economic value
The fur of the possum is very fine and soft. For many years possums were important as a source of income in rural areas. They are now fully protected in all of Australia, except in Tasmania where there is a short legal hunting season. In the 1980's about 300,000 possum skins worth over $1 million were taken annually. In New Zealand the possum fur trade was (in 1980) worth about $ 20 million annually.

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Pest Status
In urban areas, orchards and eucalypt and pine plantations possums can be a nuisance and an economic liability. Sometimes it seems necessary to get rid of them. When shooting or poisoning is not possible then trapping them in a wire cage trap is best. But what should be done with a live possum in a trap? Studies have shown that when possums are released in city parks, or even when moved to forest areas most of them die within a few weeks. If they are a nuisance because they get into your house it is better to provide them with a suitable nest box and block access to the attic or shed. (see Dept. Natural Resources and Environment pamphlet "Living with Possums")

Possums are a more serious pest in New Zealand for two reasons: they do extensive damage to the forest, and they are responsible for the transmission and maintenance of bovine tuberculosis in cattle. Large scale possum control programs using poison bait have some success in limiting the damage but so far it has not been possible to eliminate the possums from the forests. The ecology of the possum is much better understood in New Zealand than in Australia primarily because of its economic value and cost.

Further Reading
The most recent and accessible reference to possums in Victoria is Menkhorst, P. W. (ed) (1995). **Mammals of Victoria: distribution, ecology and conservation.** Melbourne: Oxford University Press. Viii pp. 1-359.

Most libraries will have the **Complete Book of Australian Mammals** which gives two pages of information on the Common Brushtail Possum.

The most complete reference to all aspects of the biology of possums can be found on pages 636-651 in Walton, D. W. and Richardson, B. J. (eds) (1989). **Fauna of Australia. Mammalia.** Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service Vol. 1B x pp. 401-1227.

For more detailed information it is necessary to consult scientific journals such as Wildlife Research, Australian Journal of Zoology, and Australian Mammalogy.

If you find an orphaned, sick or injured wildllife contact the **Wildlife Rescue and Information Network Inc.** Phone 0419 356 433 or contact the **Department of Natural Resources and Environment.**

This pamphlet is sponsored by the **Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.** It may be copied for non-profit educational purposes providing the Club is acknowledged.

Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.
P. O. Box 396
Bendigo, 3552

Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Speaker Syllabus for General Meetings – Second Wednesday 7:30 pm

Date – 2000	Topic	Speaker
9 February	Club members presenting results of small studies in Natural History	
8 March	**Rabbits** Dr Coman is the author of the recently published book: Tooth and Nail: the Story of the Rabbit in Australia	**Brian Coman** P.O. Box 113 Strathfieldsaye, Vic 3551
12 April	**Aboriginal Plant Use and Land Management**	**Beth Gott** Dept of Biological Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, Vic 3168
10 May	**Environmental Law**	**Barry Phillips** School of Management, Technology and Environment, LaTrobe University, Bendigo, P.O. Box 199, Bendigo 3552
2 June	**Special Speaker for World Environment Day**	To be announced
14 June	**Mushrooms and Fungi**	**Robert Seviour** Dept of Biological Sciences LaTrobe University, Bendigo, P.O. Box 199, Bendigo, 3552
12 July	**Hollow Formation in Box-Ironbark forests**	**Les Vearing** Forester in Charge, Bendigo Forest Management Area, Dept of Natural Resources and Environment, Box 3100, Bendigo Mail Centre 3554
9 August	**Fallen Timber and Fauna Habitat**	**Lawrie Conole** 3 Gezireh Street, Pascoe Vale South Victoria 3044
13 September	**President's Address at Annual General Meeting**	**Rodney Orr**
11 October	**Soils of Bendigo**	**Nathalie Baxter** Land Evaluation Officer Centre foe Land Protection P.O. Box 3100, Bendigo Mail Centre. 3554
8 November		To be announced
13 December	**Christmas Dinner**	No speaker this month

Diary

The General, Bird Observers Group and Mammal Survey Group meetings are held at the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High Street, Golden Square, unless otherwise indicated.

General Meeting

Wednesday, February 9, 7:30pm
Club members presenting results of small studies in Natural History

Wednesday, March 8, 7:30pm
Dr Brian Coman, the author of the recently published book 'Tooth and Nail', will talk about.....rabbits.

Wednesday, April 12, 7:30
Dr Beth Gott from Monash University (Dept of Biological Sciences) will talk about Aboriginal Plant Use and Land Management.

Mammal Study Group Excursion

29 March 2000 – Wednesday evening:

The Mammal Study Group will be capturing bats at Lake Weeroona again this year as part of a long term study of bats in the Bendigo Region. BBQ at the picnic pavilion at 6:30pm, the bats expected to appear around 7:50pm
For details please see page 6.

For information about the Mammal Study Group ring Bill Holsworth on 5443 4063.

Bird Observers Group

Sunday, February 6
Atlassing Excursion to Kimbolton Forest, Lake Eppalock,
Meet 9am at the Clubroom, this is a half-day excursion.
For further details ring Bev Culvenor 54421983 or Anne Bridley 54493479.

It is planned that the Atlassing Excursions are conducted on the first Sunday of every month next year. Ring Bev Culvenor or Anne Bridley for details.

Other Events

VFNCA March Campout in 2000

Friday March 10 - Monday March 13
The Geelong Field Naturalists Club is inviting members to next year's annual campout.
Due to this being a holiday weekend, it is essential that you book as soon as possible.
See pages 12 and 13 of the December *Whirrakee* for further details.
Please contact Jane Cleary if you would like a copy of the map.
Contact Dick Southcombe if you have additional questions on 52433916

Wildlife Rescue & Information Network Inc.

W.R.I.N. is an organisation dedicated to the care of orphaned, sick or injured native animals. It is fully endorsed by the Dept of Natural Resources and Environment.
Please call our Emergency Number for Help for Fauna in Need. Phone: 0419 356433

Advance Notice
Fourth Australasian Native Orchid Conference and Show, Melbourne 5 - 8 October 2000.
Registration Forms are now available

Supper

The usual arrangements for supper are as follows: members either bring a plate or pay $1 for supper. This small amount is used to reimburse members who purchase essential supper supplies.